



Evenki people dancing in the village of Bakaldyn near Yakutsk.



Linguist and folklorist Anna Myreeva (right) during an Evenki healing ritual in Bakaldyn near Yakutsk.

All photos courtesy of the author

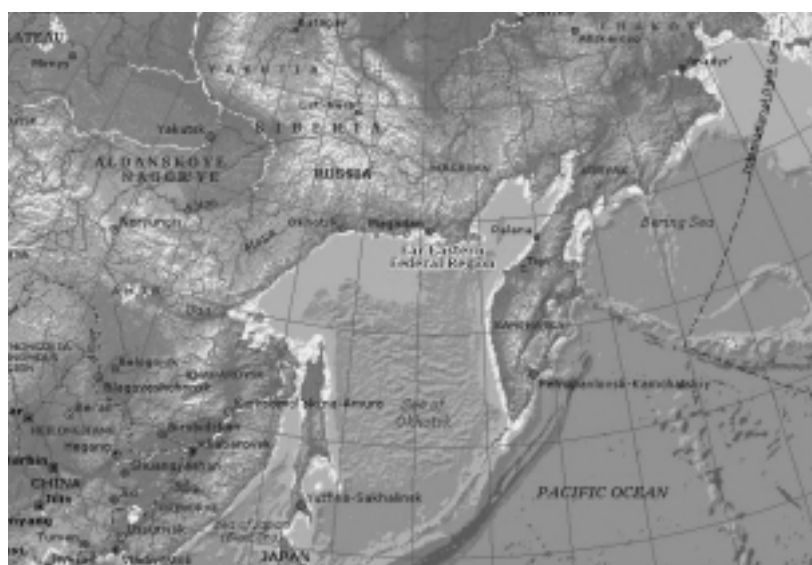
Voices from Tundra and Taiga Vitality and Education

Report >
North East Asia

In the Evenki village of Bakaldyn, some 60 kilometres from Yakutsk, a dancing and healing ritual is taking place. Holding twigs with dry leaves glowing at the edges, diseases and evil thoughts are exorcized and, thus healed, the village can be entered. As the Evenki perform songs and dances surrounded by reindeer, the sun slowly sets behind the trees and the temperature drops below minus thirty degrees Celsius. If we do not hasten to record a cultural and linguistic description of such rituals, this unique expression of the Evenki identity and experience of the world will be lost for humanity. Visiting this ritual was the beginning of a hopefully fruitful cooperation with the fascinating peoples of the Asian North.

By Cecilia Odé

Native speakers of different ethnic groups in the region are bilingual: they all speak Russian. It is mainly elderly women who use or understand their indigenous language, sometimes rather poorly, by their own admission. From Stalin to Gorbachov, roughly speaking, languages other than Russian were, if not forbidden, at least not taught on the island of Sakhalin. Children were taken to boarding schools where Russian was the one and only language. This explains why most competent speakers of indigenous languages are of the older generation. It is, therefore, remarkable that one of their teachers, Nivkh language teacher Mrs S.F. Bessonova, was recently awarded the title 'Teacher of Merit of the Russian Federation', showing that, in contemporary Russia, indigenous languages have been rehabilitated and may



The island of Sakhalin and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the north-eastern part of Siberia, Russian Federation.

again be taught. Within this new environment, there still is urgent need for a project such as 'Voices from Tundra

and Taiga', which aims to build a scientific digital phono- and video-library of ethnolinguistic materials on

CD/DVD and on the internet (for example, spoken texts, songs, folkloristic narratives) to be used for research, and also to develop courseware for the safeguarding and revitalizing of the given languages.

Sakhalin

The island of Sakhalin, with a length of nearly 950 kilometres and a varying width from 15 to 40 kilometres, is home to a persistently decreasing population of approximately 600,000 today, some 170,000 of whom live in the capital Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Of the island's total population 83 per cent is Russian. The indigenous population of Sakhalin as well as some of its languages are closely related to the indigenous people and languages on the Japanese side of the border. After a period of Japanese rule from 1905 till 1945, Sakhalin, together with the neighbouring Kuril Islands, is now part of the Russian Fed-

eration. As for the languages spoken on the island, Nivkh and Ulta are probably the oldest and only aboriginal ones. Nivkh is an isolated language, while the other indigenous languages of the area, including Ulta, belong to the Tungusic languages (explanation follows below). Ulta, being in a much worse situation than Nivkh, is in dire need of linguistic research and training programmes. Until 1995, Ulta was an unwritten language, and the only materials available consist of a limited language description and some booklets with fairy tales, games, and songs using the Cyrillic alphabet. At present, an Ulta alphabet is under construction and other steps toward its preservation are also taken.

In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Sakhalin), at the Sakhalin Regional Museum, the week-long seminar 'New approaches for safeguarding the disappearing languages and cultures of the aboriginal peoples of Sakhalin' included a training in the teaching of phonetics for native teachers of the four endangered languages of Sakhalin: Nivkh, Ulta, Evenki, and Nanai. The group of participants of the seminars organized on the island was very heterogeneous with only some of them having had a linguistic education. All were highly motivated and had come to the capital wishing to improve their skills as a language teacher and, some of them, keen to research their own cultural heritage. Our main subjects were orthography, orthoepy, and prosody (stress, intonation, duration, and rhythm), for which there is so far hardly any courseware available. During lessons confusion arose, due to the fact that Nivkh has three dialects. The students addressed matters such as, 'Which dialect do we teach our children?' These serious discussions were interrupted by pleasant breaks in which women came up with the origin of names: such as *iuiuk* 'eternal spleen' for females, and, to exorcize a new-born boy, *ochan* 'sick and evil'.

This seminar was an important step

Language Vitality and Endangerment

In the tables below the total population of ethnic groups included in the programme 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga' on Sakhalin and in the Sakha Republic are given, including numbers of members still speaking their mother tongue. The degree of endangerment, according to the UNESCO Redbook of Endangered Languages, does not only depend on the number of actual speakers, although it is an important feature. For a detailed discussion see *Language Vitality and Endangerment* by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages: Paris, March 2003. Note that most data presented here are from various sources, some of which go back to 1989 and 1993. Numbers have been rounded off.

Sakhalin					
Ethnic group	Total population	Population on Sakhalin	Speakers	Speakers on Sakhalin	Degree of endangerment
Nivkh	4,500	2,500	1,000	500	seriously endangered
Ulta	350	350	<35	<35	nearly extinct
Evenki	30,000	190	10,000	30	endangered
Nanai	12,000	170	5,800	40	seriously endangered
Sakha Republic					
Ethnic group	Total population	Population in Sakha	Speakers	Speakers in Sakha	Degree of endangerment
Yukagir (tundra)	700	700	<50	<50	nearly extinct
Yukagir (forest)	400	400	<50	<50	nearly extinct
Evenki	30,000	14,500	10,000	1,200	endangered
Even	17,000	8,500	7,000	2,800	endangered

towards the realization of one of the aims of the project: the creation of a research centre in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. In this centre, teachers and scholars on the island will be involved in education and in describing the languages of local ethnic groups.

At Sakhalin State University, workshops were organized with the aim of attracting young linguists to study local languages. And, during a long interview about the seminar on Sakhalin TV, young viewers were invited to express their opinion on the need to safeguard the culture of northern peoples: for scientific purposes (13 votes), for the peoples themselves (12 votes), and for mankind (123 votes). An encouragement to continue the fight to safeguard the area's indigenous languages.

Sakha Republic

It takes five hours to travel from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk to Yakutsk, flying north from autumn to winter over a landscape with white rivers like decorative ribbons gently draped on snowy plains and mountains. In the Sakha Republic, with a surface of, roughly speaking, 3 million square kilometres, and a population of over one million, of which one third are Yakuts, large numbers of ethnic groups speak their mother tongue. Languages focused on in this project are the nearly extinct Yukagir (an isolated language), Evenki, and Even (Tungusic), which have fascinating prosodic phenomena. For example, in Yukagir there is a gradual change from speaking to singing in the art of storytelling, where the intermediate phase between speaking and singing is particularly striking.

In Yakutsk (Sakha Republic), at the Arctic Institute and the Institute of Northern Minorities Problems, Odé held workshops for students and researchers. After this workshop some students showed interest in the project and even seriously considered continuing to study local languages after their

Master's degree. In fact, this is exactly what we are aiming at: local linguists describing a local language, enhancing its vitality and passing it on to future generations. ◀

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www.iias.nl/iias/research/ode/index.html

Information >

Projects related to 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga'

www.let.rug.nl/~degraaf

www.let.rug.nl/~markus

www.elpr.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp

www.nwo.nl; www.mpi.nl/DOBES

www.fa.knaw.nl

UNESCO Redbook on endangered languages in Northeast Asia

www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/nasia_report.html

The Sakhalin Regional Museum

www.museum.sakh.com

The Institute of Northern Minority Problems in Yakutsk

www.sakha.ru/sakha/ync/ync_eng/narod.htm

The Sakhalin Energy Investment Company

www.sakhalinenergy.com/

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